



tar heel tastes

Irregardless Café

Philosophy and the freshest food share the menu at this Raleigh eatery, providing a nurturing sanctuary that feeds the soul as well as the appetite.

BY DIANE SILCOX-JARRETT

You can't consider yourself a chef unless you cut all 10 fingers and burn both of your hands," laughs Arthur Gordon, owner of Irregardless Café in Raleigh. If you have ever tasted one of

Gordon's original dishes, you are thankful for the cuts and burns he has sustained while learning to cook. Every one of them represents a step in learning along a path that reaches back into his childhood.

At an early age, Gordon took over much of the cooking in his family.

"My mom wasn't that great a cook, and I decided that to survive, I had better learn." After graduating from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Gordon knew he wanted to become a chef. "I sent off my application to the Culinary Institute of America. They sent me a return letter explaining they wanted me to have a year of cooking experience."

Gordon thought it would be a good idea to combine his chemistry and philosophy degrees and start his own restaurant. "I decided that would be the best way for me to acquire experience." Pulling \$9,000 of resources together with two friends, Gordon bought an old house in Raleigh and made it into a restaurant. "We did all the work inside ourselves, so that helped save money," explains Gordon.

The restaurant opened February 10, 1975, with the unusual name of Irregardless Café. "I chose the name because when I wrote 'irregardless' in college papers, professors would circle it in red. I wanted finally to be able to use the word," Gordon gleefully laughs.

When the café opened, there were not that many restaurants in Raleigh, and people were always looking for somewhere new to eat. "We decided to go pure vegetarian. There was still a lot of the late-1960s social consciousness around. We started the live entertainment and the Sunday brunch when we first opened, and we have continued both since," says Gordon.

Trial advertising

Irregardless received free advertising in an unusual way when it first opened. At that time, the trial of Joann Little, who was accused of stabbing a jailer, was getting national coverage. "Two of my waitresses were on jury duty and were chosen to be seated. When asked where they worked, they answered 'Irregardless Café.' It was such a unique name that the AP wire picked it up, and the name went all over the country. Suddenly, we had lines out the door."

Gordon saw this as a wake-up call, and he and his partners decided they needed to figure out what they were doing. "This really wasn't the best time to start a business. The Middle East gas crisis was going on, and people were really watching their money." But there was something special about the new eatery in downtown Raleigh.

Located on a one-way street near Central Prison, the restaurant has what Gordon grades as a C-minus location at best. "They always say when you open a business, the most important thing is location, location, location. We don't have a great location, and the parking lot is 100 yards from the front door," he says.

Photo: James



Like a charm, Irregardless Café changes its colors to meet its customers' needs.

So there must be something that keeps bringing people back, including some who have been eating here since the first day. "I was there the day they opened," says Howard Twigg, a Raleigh attorney. "From the beginning, they have served the freshest, finest food in a charming atmosphere. You always know the food is going to be fresh." Every morning before he goes to the restaurant, Gordon visits the farmers market and selects only the choicest vegetables and fruits to serve his customers. In the early spring, dishes made with fresh asparagus make an annual return to the menu and delight those who have been waiting all year for them. Summertime brings luscious cantaloupe and blueberries that cover the light and fluffy pancakes and waffles.

Like a chameleon, Irregardless Café changes its colors to meet its customers' needs. "Sometimes it seems I'm running three different restaurants in the same building," says Gordon. During lunch, local businesspeople meet and make deals over sandwiches filled with fresh spinach and cheeses while friends gather and laugh, drinking Red Zinger tea and enjoying chocolate cake that tastes like your grandmother made it just for you.

At dinner, the atmosphere shifts; customers enjoy selecting from an extensive wine list and listening to live music by local musicians. Saturday nights Irregardless takes on the feel of a small nightclub, as four tables are moved back, and a dance floor opens beginning at nine o'clock. "This is great for married couples," explains Gordon. "They can eat dinner, have a night of dancing, and get home in good time to relieve the baby-sitter."

For Sunday brunch families come after church and let their children enjoy chocolate chip pancakes topped with ice cream. "One of my customers told me recently that when she was a child, the way her parents got her to go to church without fussing was to bring her here afterwards. Now she brings her own children to eat on Sundays," laughs Gordon. One reason Irregardless appeals to parents with small and school-aged children is



Arthur Gordon says he feels that his restaurant has a soul.

that it is smoke free and has been that way since 1983. It was the first non-smoking restaurant in North Carolina.

Change and charity

There have been changes in the restaurant over its 27-year history. Seafood and meat were added to the menu, but the biggest changes were due to a fire in 1994 that engulfed the kitchen and part of the dining area. The fire started outside where cardboard was being stacked for recycling.

"The police said it was arson," explains Gordon. He had to close the restaurant for 11 months while the reconstruction took place.

His faith sustained him during the rebuilding, and his loyalty to his employees never wavered. "I am a strong believer in giving back to society; when the fire happened, I told my employees if they would work for a charitable organization the same number of hours they worked for me, I would continue to pay them at their current wages, and they would have their jobs when we reopened." Several employees took him up on his offer, and some volunteered at the Inner-Faith Food Shelter where Gordon had been donating food for several years. "I have been very fortunate with my employees," says Gordon, "and I have always had excellent chefs, many of whom have worked their way up through the ranks."

When he reopened, the dark wood-veneer tables and paneling and the huge, colorfully painted parrot in the ladies room were all gone. Soothing colors of turquoise and peach have lightened up the room. Landscape paintings by local artist Kyle Highsmith decorate the walls. A customer for years, Highsmith eats at Irregardless several times a week. Neither he nor his wife enjoys cooking. "We just moved to Cameron Park nearby. My wife says we moved there so we could walk to

if you're going

Irregardless Café is located at 901 West Morgan Street in Raleigh.

Telephone: (919) 833-9920

Open for lunch Tuesday through Friday 11:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m.

Open for dinner Tuesday through Thursday 5:30 p.m.-9:30 p.m. and Friday and Saturday 5:30 p.m.-10 p.m. (Dancing begins at 9 p.m. on Saturday night and ends at midnight.)

Open for Sunday brunch from 10 a.m.-2 p.m.



our dining room here at Irregardless," he laughs.

Another change was the addition of a bar. "When I was first talking to the architect, he wanted me to put the bar in the front, but I disagreed and had him put it in the back. I didn't want to be known as a bar serving good food. I want to be known as a good restaurant that happens to have a bar," says Gordon.

Fire-tested loyalty

Even after all the changes the restaurant has undergone, loyal customers can still experience the two signature hallmarks of Irregardless. The first is uniquely prepared, savory food. Gordon's customers waited patiently for 11 months to taste his Spanish paella and blackened salmon flavored with his special combination of spices. If Gordon had any worries that his customers had forgotten him, he set them aside on the second day he was open. On that day, he had as much business as any day prior to the fire.

The second hallmark of Irregardless is its atmosphere. As you walk in the door, you can feel the stresses of your life and the weight on your shoulders becoming lighter. The atmosphere is just as important to Gordon as the quality of his food. "What feeds me is my strong sense of faith that I am doing what I was called to do. I want this place to be a sanctuary. When you come in here, I make sure you are treated with dignity and respect. It is a place that lets you recharge for what is awaiting you outside those doors. I feel my restaurant has a soul and is a friend to those who come here."

That friend was there for Gordon's clientele after the terrorist attack on America on September 11. Like most everyone else, Gordon saw a slow-down in business. "People just didn't feel like treating themselves," says Gordon. About three weeks later on a Friday night, Gordon's customers decided it was time to find some comfort with their old friend — one with a soul that just happens to serve good food. "It was like the dam broke. All

of a sudden we were having 20-minute waits. It was wonderful to see everyone beginning to heal. That night demonstrated how we are all interconnected on some level."

Irregardless may be in a C-minus location and the parking lot 100 yards away from the front door, but who cares? If you have never been there, you will be charmed from the minute you step in the door until the minute you scrape the last bit of apple pie from your plate and wish there was just a little more. And if you have eaten at the Irregardless Café, you know you'll be back because there's not a better feeling than being treated to the nurturing atmosphere the restaurant provides.

As for those cooking lessons Gordon wanted to take with the Culinary Institute of America — they never happened. When your faith has led you to your calling in life and those who share it are thankful, the pedigree doesn't much matter. ☞

Diane Silver-Jarrett lives in Raleigh.